

Proper 15  
Cycle C RCL

Isaiah 5:1-7

This poem may be based on a familiar love song that used the common figure of a (female) lover as a choice vineyard. (See Song of Songs 1:6,14; 2:3,14, *etc.*) The male lover (the God of Israel) is the prophet's "dear friend" (*dodi*, verse 1), and the crop this friend planted was of the choicest Palestinian grapes (*soreq*, verse 2, grapes native to the Soreq Valley) in a fertile location protected from poachers by a watchtower and wall. The image is of the terrace farming common to the mountains of Palestine and still practiced today. The last part of the last verse employs two word plays. God expected "justice" (*mishpat*) but got "bloodshed" (*mispah*), "righteousness" (*cedaqah*) but got a "loud cry" (*c' aqah*) instead.

Psalm 80:1-2, 8-18

In Babylon there was no temple for the Jews where they might pour out their lamentations to the Lord. Nevertheless, Jewish writers, probably priests, imitated the style of the Temple's old *community laments* to decry their Exile and to attempt to rouse the God, who once ruled in Zion, to come to their aid once more. Verses 1-3 (Hebrew 2-4) use the names of northern tribes: Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin. This has led to the improbable argument by some that the lament originated in ancient Israel that fell to Sargon II in 721 BCE, long before Judah's exile. The omission of verses 8-17 (Hebrew 9-18) deprives us of the opportunity to examine the various rationales the writer uses to convince God to intervene.

Jeremiah 23:23-29

The false prophets who misled Israel at the end of the Judean monarchy confused their hearers by relating their personal dreams as though dreams were the epitome of revelation. The test of true prophecy, our author insists, was always what it said about God's purposes in the world. By substituting personal fantasies for authentic prophecy the false prophets led Israel astray and now cannot hide from the punishment for their sin. This prose passage reads like an embellishment of the poetic oracle against false prophets in verses 18-22 and may derive from a period much later than those verses.

Psalm 82

This *hymn* addresses the question as to why there are no divine beings in the underworld. God and the hosts that serve him are only heavenly beings, and the underworld, as the Israelites understood it, was a shadowy realm inhabited only by the shades of the dead. One of the main functions of underworld gods in the mythologies of the ancient Near East was to provide justice for the world. This is the function which the gods have, according to verses 2-4, spectacularly failed to provide. The first verse of the psalm is very much like the account from Ugarit in Syria of the god Baal's judgment of the underworld gods Mot and Yamm.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

The ascription of the great deeds of the heroes of Israel to "faith" is not something one finds when reading the biblical accounts of Moses, the judges, David and Samuel. We discover the reason for the witnesses' interest in us: "they should not be perfected apart from us" (Hebrews 11:40b, my translation). The faithful witnesses described in chapter 11 cannot achieve the heavenly kingdom apart from the present generation of Christians, so they look to the present

generation for their own fulfillment. Like them, Christians are called to endure all of the trials set before them in faith. Success will result in salvation for them and for the heroic figures of the Hebrew scriptures.

Luke 12: 49-56

The author draws this material from the so-called “Q” source, material used by the authors of Matthew and Luke but not by Mark. Our author has put together into one speech several sayings that Matthew put in different parts of his Gospel. (See Matthew 5:25-26, 10:34-36, and 16:2-3.) Those interpreters who choose to view Luke as being insensitive to the apocalyptic, end-of-the-world nature of our Lord’s message must ignore passages like this. In many ways the Third Gospel preserves and transmits the sense of the end of time much more cogently than the other three Gospels.

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